

KOSOVO 2022 INTERNATIONAL RELIGIOUS FREEDOM REPORT

Executive Summary

The constitution prohibits religious discrimination and provides for freedom of religion, subject to limitations to ensure public order, health, and safety or to protect the rights of others. The law does not provide a means for religious groups to acquire legal status. A draft of amendments to grant them such status remained pending at year's end.

In June, police prevented Serbian Orthodox Church (SOC) clergy from performing a liturgy on the occasion of Orthodox Holy Ascension in the contested Christ the Savior Church. Some schools continued to enforce a government directive prohibiting religious attire, thereby denying school access to Muslim students who wore a hijab. There were also reports of discrimination against Muslim women wearing religious attire in public and private employment. The government again failed to implement a 2016 Constitutional Court decision recognizing SOC ownership of land around the Visoki Decani Monastery. The SOC criticized remarks from senior government officials, including President Vjosa Osmani and Prime Minister Albin Kurti, that challenged the merits of the court decision as “politically irresponsible and dangerous.” The Kosovo Protestant Evangelical Church (KPEC), Jehovah's Witnesses representatives, and secularists said a lack of institutional support for dedicated burial sites prevented them from conducting burial services according to their beliefs.

In July, three individuals assaulted the imam of Lupc/Ljupc village in his mosque in Podujeva/o. Police arrested the three individuals on suspicion of attempted murder. The SOC said that in September an individual stopped a bus from Serbia with pilgrims, including children, then shouted at the pilgrims and placed a Kosovo flag on the bus's windshield. Union of Kosovo Tarikats (UKT) representatives reported concerns about anti-Sufism and negative media portrayals. Police reported 64 incidents targeting religious sites – 42 Muslim, 21 SOC, and one Catholic – in the first nine months of the year. The SOC reported instances of vandalism against its churches, stating some were religiously and ethnically motivated and attributing them to anti-Serb political rhetoric.

U.S. embassy officials continued to encourage the government to enact legislation permitting religious groups to acquire legal status, enforce mechanisms to protect freedom of religion, implement laws and judicial decisions pertaining to SOC religious sites, and resolve SOC property disputes. The Ambassador and other embassy representatives discussed religious freedom issues, including equal protection and property rights concerns, with religious and civil society leaders and encouraged religious tolerance and improved interfaith dialogue. In March, the embassy hosted an interfaith discussion with religious leaders – the first to include leaders from the Tarikat, Bektashi and The Church of Jesus Christ of Latter-day Saints (Church of Jesus Christ) communities – on religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, protection of individual rights and freedom, and the still-pending amendments to the law on religious freedom. The Ambassador visited SOC and Islamic Community of Kosovo (BIK) religious sites to maintain positive relations and dialogue with religious leaders to promote universal religious freedom without discrimination.

Section I. Religious Demography

The U.S. government estimates the total population at 2.0 million (midyear 2022). According to the 2011 census (the most recent), 95.6 percent of the population is Muslim, 2.2 percent Roman Catholic, and 1.4 percent Serbian Orthodox, with Protestants, Jews, and persons not answering or responding “other” or “none” together constituting less than 1 percent. Boston University’s 2020 World Religion Database estimates the population is 93 percent Muslim and 6 percent Christian, while 1 percent are atheist or agnostic, or belong to other religions. Local estimates of the total number of Jews range from 50 to 150. According to the SOC and international observers, lack of financial support for the census and a boycott of it by most ethnic Serbs resulted in a significant undercounting of ethnic minorities of all religious backgrounds, including SOC members, Tarikat Muslims, and Protestants. Other religious communities, including Tarikat Muslims and Protestants, also contested the registration data, stating they distrusted the census methodology and believed it resulted in undercounts of their communities’ members.

The majority of Kosovan Albanians are Muslim, although some are Christian (Orthodox, Catholic, or Protestant). Almost all Kosovan Serbs belong to the SOC. The majority of ethnic Ashkali, Bosniaks, Egyptians, Gorani, Roma, and Turks are

also Muslim, while most ethnic Montenegrins and some Roma are Christian Orthodox. Nearly all ethnic Croats are Catholic.

According to the BIK, most Muslims belong to the Hanafi Sunni school, although some are part of the Sufi Tarikat community; UKT representatives estimate there are approximately 60,000 Tarikat adherents. There is also a Sufi Bektashi religious community; no official estimate exists for the number of its adherents. Kosovan Albanians comprise the majority in 28 of the country's 38 municipalities, and Kosovan Serbs make up the majority in the remaining 10. Most SOC members reside in the 10 Serb-majority municipalities. The largest Catholic communities are in Gjakove (Albanian-language name)/Djakovica (Serbian-language name), Janjeve/Janjevo, Kline/Klina, Pristina, and Prizren. Evangelical Protestant populations, representing multiple traditions including Baptists, Pentecostals, Reformed, nondenominational, and others, are located throughout the country, concentrated in Pristina and Gjakove/Djakovica. Jehovah's Witnesses report approximately 260 members, and the Church of Jesus Christ approximately 145 members. There are small Jewish communities in Prizren and Pristina, although their numbers are unavailable.

Section II. Status of Government Respect for Religious Freedom

Legal Framework

The constitution provides for freedom of conscience and religion for all residents, including the right to change, express, or not express religious belief; practice or abstain from practicing religion; and join or refuse to join a religious community. These rights are subject to limitations for reasons of public safety and order or for the protection of the health or rights of others. The constitution provides for the separation of religious communities from public institutions, including the right of religious groups to regulate independently their own organizations, activities, and ceremonies. It provides for equal rights for all religious communities, stipulates the country is secular and neutral regarding religion, declares the state shall ensure the protection and preservation of the country's religious heritage, and prohibits discrimination based on religion. The constitution states the law may limit freedom of expression to prevent violent and hostile provocations on racial, national, ethnic, or religious grounds. It allows courts to ban organizations or activities that encourage racial, national, ethnic, or religious hatred.

The law on religious freedom stipulates there is no state religion and provides for freedom of nonreligious belief. It states, “All religions and their communes in Kosovo, including the Kosovo Islamic Community, Serbian Orthodox Church, Catholic Church, Hebrew Belief Community, and Evangelical Church, shall be offered any kind of protection and opportunity in order to have rights and freedom foreseen by this law.” The law does not prescribe any additional rights or benefits to these five named communities as compared with other religious groups. Authorities interpret the term “Evangelical Church” as encompassing all Protestant groups, regardless of denomination.

The constitution provides for rights and protection for all citizens, including maintaining, developing, and preserving their religion using their own language. The constitution also states religious communities have the right to establish religious schools and charitable institutions, with the possibility of being funded with government financial assistance “in accordance with the law and international standards.” It guarantees all ethnic communities access to public media. The law on religious freedom provides the right for religious groups to establish and use their own media, maintain unhindered peaceful contacts with persons outside the country with whom they share a religious identity, and have equitable access to public employment.

The constitution provides 20 of the 120 seats in the Assembly to representatives from ethnic minority communities, a majority of whose members are often associated with a single religious group, such as Muslims or Orthodox Christians. It also stipulates that the adoption, amendment, or repeal of any laws pertaining to religious freedom or cultural heritage requires approval by a majority of Assembly deputies representing minority communities as well as by a majority of all deputies.

The constitution provides for an Ombudsperson’s Institution, which is responsible for monitoring religious freedom, among other human rights, and recommending actions to correct violations. It stipulates the state shall take all necessary measures to protect individuals who may be subject to threats, hostility, discrimination, or violence because of their religious identity. The law criminalizes hate crime, which includes inciting discord and intolerance between religious groups, as well as crimes where religion is a motivating factor or aggravating circumstance.

The law does not require registration of religious groups, but it also does not provide a legal mechanism or specific guidance for religious groups – including the five communities named in the law on religious freedom – to obtain legal status through registration or other means. Without legal status, religious communities may not own property, open bank accounts, employ staff, or access the courts as a collective entity. Individual congregations or individuals, however, may do so and perform other administrative tasks in their own name. Local communities often recognize religious groups' possession of buildings; however, the law generally does not protect these buildings as property of a religious community, but rather as the private property of citizens or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). SOC property is an exception; the law on special protective zones (SPZs) acknowledges and protects the integrity of SOC property ownership and stewardship over designated areas within the SPZs.

The law stipulates the rights to establish humanitarian/charity organizations, accept voluntary financial contributions from individuals and institutions, and engage in national and international communication for religious purposes. The law on registering NGOs, however, does not apply to “religious communities, religious centers, or temples,” which prevents religious groups from registering as NGOs and also prohibits NGOs from conducting religious activity in the country.

The law provides safeguards for sites of religious and cultural significance and prohibits or restricts nearby activities that could damage the surrounding historical, cultural, or natural environment. According to the law, the Implementation and Monitoring Council (IMC) is responsible for arbitrating disputes between the government and the SOC concerning SPZs and other matters related to protecting the SOC's religious and cultural heritage. The IMC is a special body originating from the 2007 Comprehensive Proposal for the Kosovo Status Settlement (also known as the Ahtisaari Plan) and established by law. IMC members include the Ministry of Environment, Spatial Planning, and Infrastructure (cochair); Special Representative of the European Union (cochair); Ministry of Culture, Youth, and Sport; SOC; and the Organization for Security and Cooperation in Europe (OSCE).

Municipalities, not the central government, are legally responsible for the upkeep and maintenance of all public cemeteries, including those designated for specific religious communities.

According to the law, “Public educational institutions shall refrain from teaching religion or other activities that propagate a specific religion.” This law is unenforceable in schools operated under Serbian government-run parallel structures, over which the Kosovan government has no control.

A Ministry of Education, Science, Technology, and Information (MESTI) administrative circular on the code of conduct and disciplinary measures for elementary and high school students prohibits students from wearing religious attire on elementary and secondary school premises.

The country is not a party to the International Covenant on Civil and Political Rights, but the constitution states that the human rights and fundamental freedoms enumerated in the covenant and its protocols “are guaranteed by this Constitution, are directly applicable in the Republic of Kosovo, and, in the case of conflict, have priority over provisions of laws and other acts of public institutions.”

Government Practices

During the year, the cabinet again failed to resubmit to the Assembly proposed amendments to the law on religious freedom that would permit religious groups to acquire legal status, conduct business and acquire real and personal property in their name, open bank accounts, and gain import tax benefits. The cabinet approved the amendments and sent them to the Assembly in 2020, but the extraordinary general elections in 2021 reset the legislative amendment process, requiring the newly elected government to resubmit the amendments to the Assembly. In December, the government held an open discussion on the amendments and other issues affecting religious communities; representatives from the BIK, SOC, Catholic Church, KPEC, UKT, Bektashi, Jewish community, and Church of Jesus Christ participated. Absent enactment of the legislation, all religious communities said they continued to operate bank accounts registered to individuals instead of communities.

The UKT reported that the government’s Agency of Statistics excluded the Tarikat community from public discussions on the upcoming census.

According to the SOC, on June 2, police prevented SOC clergy from performing a liturgy on the occasion of Orthodox Holy Ascension in the contested Christ the Savior Church. The SOC said police stopped its clergy, accompanied by a group of believers, from unlocking the door to the church. Media outlets reported that police told the Pristina parish priest that he had no permit for gatherings inside the church. The SOC maintained that the law did not require any permit and said the police had not responded to an SOC request to provide the legal basis for preventing SOC access to the church. In a public statement, the SOC said, "With its openly discriminatory attitude towards the SOC in Kosovo, Kosovan institutions are constantly sending the message that our people cannot live freely and that basic religious and human rights do not apply to Orthodox Serbs." Police said they had not received prior notification about planned religious activities.

In December, the government did not approve entry to SOC Patriarch Porfirije's entry. SOC and government officials reported that Kosovan authorities conditioned the Patriarch's December 26-28 visit on the Patriarch's public denunciation of what those authorities said was support of some SOC members for "criminal groups" maintaining roadblocks in northern Kosovo. The Ministry of Foreign Affairs and Diaspora released a statement saying that the Patriarch's visit request was not "rejected," but was rather conditioned on the SOC distancing itself from actions and acts of violence. On December 25, the SOC released a statement calling the failure to approve the Patriarch's entry "a serious violation of religious rights and freedom."

The SOC said that a group of Serbian pilgrims, citing security concerns and past precedent, requested a police escort in June to visit the remains of a church damaged during the 1999 war in Mushutishte/Musutiste (Suhareke/Suva Reka). According to the SOC, police denied the request, citing unarticulated administrative reasons. The pilgrims subsequently canceled their visit.

According to the BIK, some schools continued to deny access to Muslim girls who attempted to attend school wearing a hijab as a result of the enforcement of the MESTI administrative circular prohibiting religious attire on school property. The BIK reported, however, that some school directors allowed students to return to school and wear the hijab. In March, an Assembly deputy posted to social media that a high school in Gjakova/Djakovica municipality displayed a sign listing the hijab with other prohibited items, including weapons, smoking, and makeup.

Media outlets reported that the school director and her family received threats of violence due to the deputy's post. Imam Labinot Maliqi called on MESTI to dismiss the school director and threatened to sue MESTI for its inaction. In August, a former legal advisor to Prime Minister Kurti, Durim Berisha, submitted a written request to MESTI to repeal its ban on religious attire at preuniversity public schools. Berisha concurrently initiated an online campaign and petition that gathered more than 20,000 signatures in 10 days. On August 4, the BIK voiced its support for Berisha's efforts, repeating its long-standing call for the government to lift the ban on Islamic headscarves in public schools. In September, Berisha filed a lawsuit against MESTI for administrative silence on his request. At year's end, the ban remained in place.

The BIK said there were cases of discrimination against Muslim women who wore religious attire while working in public institutions or seeking private sector employment. In September, media reported that a high school director in Suhareka/SuvaReka municipality verbally abused a math teacher for wearing a hijab, and the school council subsequently dismissed the teacher.

In February, the government concluded its investigation of a global Christian humanitarian NGO following accusations that it had violated the law prohibiting any NGO from conducting religious activity in the country. The government fined the NGO, which ceased its operations in the country in April.

Decan/Decani municipal officials and the central government continued to fail to implement a 2016 Constitutional Court decision upholding the Supreme Court's 2012 ruling that recognized the SOC's Visoki Decani Monastery's ownership of approximately 24 hectares (59 acres) of land in the monastery's vicinity. There was no progress during the year, despite repeated appeals by the SOC and international community to the Kosovo Cadastral Agency and, more broadly, the government, to register the SOC's ownership of the land. In 2021, the Constitutional Court stated all government institutions were obligated to enforce its decisions and referred the issue to the state prosecutor. At year's end, the prosecutor had not initiated criminal proceedings against the officials responsible for refusing to implement the decision.

During a public television interview in February, Prime Minister Kurti stated that "the decision of the Constitutional Court of Kosovo to compel the local authorities

of Decani to return 24 hectares of land and forests to the Decani Monastery is based on the discriminatory policy of [the] government of Serbia from 1997.” In April, media reported that Culture, Youth, and Sport Minister Hajrulla Ceku said that “in principle when there is a decision from the Constitutional Court it should be implemented, but we should never [take] anything for granted. We need critical thinking to analyze what is ... in the decision.” In June, Decan/Decani Mayor Bashkim Ramosaj again publicly reaffirmed he did not intend to execute the court’s decision. In response to Ramosaj’s statement, a group of civil society organizations from Kosovo and Serbia called for all Constitutional Court decisions to be upheld. The SOC repeatedly criticized remarks of senior government officials, including of President Osmani and Prime Minister Kurti, that challenged the merits of the Constitutional Court decision. In a public statement in February, the SOC said that government commentary on the final court ruling is “politically irresponsible and dangerous because it directly targets Visoki Decani Monastery, its monastic community, and the cultural heritage [site] under UNESCO protection.”

On October 10, Visoki Decani Monastery said that “obstruction of the court ruling by politicians is violating the independent judiciary.” In a July press release, the pan-European federation of cultural heritage civil society organizations, Europa Nostra, cited objections from Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Liburn Aliu, as well as Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport Ceku, to inclusion of the monastery on the federation’s 2021 list of seven most endangered sites in Europe, but it reaffirmed the validity of the monastery’s inclusion. Europa Nostra did not include the Visoki Decani Monastery in its top seven list for 2022. NATO troops in the country continued to provide security at the Visoki Decani Monastery.

The SOC’s cessation of official communication with the government continued throughout the year and caused the IMC not to meet during the year. The SOC halted official communication with the government in 2021, citing the government’s non-implementation of both the Visoki Decani Monastery Constitutional Court decision and a 2020 Italian-brokered arrangement between the IMC and Decan/Decani municipal authorities on the Decani SPZ roads. The arrangement included development of both a bypass road external to the SPZ boundaries that would connect Decan/Decani to Montenegro, and a separate local road within the SPZ. Local authorities continued additional road

construction works outside the SPZ that the SOC said were an attempt to create a situation in which local authorities could subsequently strengthen their justification for construction within the SPZ.

A University of Pristina lawsuit against the SOC remained under consideration in the Basic Court in Pristina at year's end. The suit seeks annulment of a 1991 grant of land on the university campus to the SOC by the former Yugoslav government and demolition of the uncompleted, but consecrated, SOC Church of Christ the Savior built on the land.

UKT representatives reported longstanding disputes over property restitution. The UKT cited two outstanding instances of seizure of Tarikat property in Prizren in 1946 and in 1996 by the former Yugoslav government.

Representatives of the Bektashi community reported that they were able to utilize only two of their properties, both in Gjakova/Djakovica, as the remainder of their tekkes had been destroyed or occupied following the 1999 war. Bektashi representatives reported longstanding challenges to property restitution due to the destruction of property documents during the war and expressed concerns about the degrading state of a dispossessed Bektashi tekke in Prizren. Bektashi community representatives said that they had successfully recovered a property in Peja/Pec in June.

In June, the Pristina municipality approved a permit for a Turkish government-funded central mosque in the city center. The permit application had been pending since construction began in 2012. Some citizens continued to oppose construction of the mosque, citing concerns about the source of funding and disagreement with the Ottoman-style design rather than traditional Kosovan mosque architecture. Some local imams continued to state that existing downtown mosques fulfilled the needs of their constituency and that there was no demand for such a large mosque in the area.

At year's end, Jewish groups had not yet decided on a suitable location for a synagogue for which the Pristina Municipality had issued a construction permit in 2016. The municipality stated it was ready to allocate land once the question was resolved. The Jewish community in Prizren said it received approval and funding support from the government to start renovation of a building dedicated to the

Jewish Cultural Center/Synagogue in Prizren; the government started renovation work in November.

A KPEC pastor reported that the Gjakova/Djakovica municipality agreed to allocate a parcel of land for building a church and community center, but the Ministry of Local Government and Spatial Planning overruled the municipality, asserting the church's proposed plans did not comply with urban planning guidelines.

The Ministry of Local Government Administration (MLGA) reported most municipalities adopted legal acts and covered funeral expenses for all religious groups and were responsible for costs associated with cemetery administration. Municipalities that had not adopted legal acts on the administration of funeral expenses and, therefore, did not cover funeral expenses included Zubin Potok, Zvecan/e, Mitrovice/a North, Leposavic/q, Mamushe/Mamusa, Gračanica/e, Novo Brdo/Novoberde, Strpce/Shterpce, Junik, Ranilug/Ranillug, and Partes/h. According to the MLGA, most municipalities improved their budget planning and expanded contracts with private companies for the maintenance of cemeteries.

The KPEC, Jehovah's Witnesses, and secularists said a lack of institutional support for dedicated burial sites prevented members from conducting burial services in accordance with their religious beliefs or lack thereof. Jehovah's Witnesses said that the authorities required a religious leader of another faith to preside over burial services, while secularists reported most municipal governments did not allow them to conduct a burial without a religious representative presiding. Pristina's Catholic, Orthodox Christian, and Jewish communities continued to use separate public cemeteries that these groups independently maintained and operated.

The SOC and Kosovan Serb communities continued to state that in many Kosovan Albanian-majority municipalities, local governments did not provide adequate maintenance for their cemeteries and police did not provide sufficient security, allowing for occasional acts of vandalism. In October, media outlets reported the vandalism of two tombstones in an SOC cemetery in Klokot/Klllokot. At year's end, a police investigation remained ongoing.

According to the BIK, the central government continued to provide some funding for Islamic education in the BIK madrassah in Pristina and its branches in Prizren and Gjilan/Gnjilane. Representatives of other religious communities said this funding was discriminatory because the government did not provide funding for religious education to any other religious group.

Most ethnic Serbs and some Bosniaks, Gorani, Croats, and Roma continued to attend Serbian-language public schools operated and funded by Serbian government parallel structures. The schools offered Christian Orthodox classes, and the Serbian government paid for the instructors, who were members of the SOC. Students were allowed to opt out of these classes.

KPEC and Bektashi representatives said government officials' public recognition or celebration of Hanafi Sunni Muslim holidays such as Eid al-Adha was discriminatory against religious minorities because government officials did not make similar statements or celebrate other religious holidays equally. Bektashi representatives stated that neither President Osmani nor Prime Minister Kurti responded to invitations to attend Bektashi celebrations or congratulated the community on Bektashi holidays. The KPEC again said the government's official calendar of holidays referred to "Catholic" or "Orthodox" holidays, but not "Christian" or "Protestant" holidays. The KPEC stated the government's lack of advocacy for religious minorities contributed to a perceived climate of discrimination. The KPEC also said the presence of Islamic symbols in some public buildings contributed to a perception of Muslim influence over government institutions.

The SOC expressed concerns that senior government officials, including Minister of Culture, Youth, and Sport Ceku, referred to the SOC as either "the Orthodox Church" or "the Church" instead of its full name. The SOC said it considered such statements by government officials as denial of the SOC's identity and an attempt at "Kosovarization" of the SOC.

The OSCE continued to monitor implementation of legislation on protecting SPZs around Serbian Orthodox religious and heritage sites. The Police Unit for the Security of Religious and Cultural Heritage Buildings continued to provide 24-hour security to 24 SPZs countrywide.

The OSCE, citing improved maintenance of cemeteries by some municipal governments, reported relations between religious communities and municipalities again improved. The OSCE continued to advocate inclusion of representatives of all major religious communities in municipal community safety councils that meet to discuss security issues.

The BIK stated that its members were explicitly included in the government's economic recovery schemes to overcome challenges stemming from the effects of the COVID-19 pandemic and the war in Ukraine.

The Water Services Regulatory Authority stated it once again waived water utility fees during the year for religious buildings belonging to all religious communities. In December, the KPEC reported that its church in Gjakova/Djakovica received water bills from a local water supply company in contradiction of the waiver of water utility fees. The KPEC said it raised its concerns with both the company and the Water Services Regulatory Authority but decided to pay the water bills after the company threatened legal action.

Section III. Status of Societal Respect for Religious Freedom

In July, three individuals assaulted the imam of Lupc/Ljupc village in his mosque in Podujeva/o. Media outlets reported the imam had previously referred the perpetrators to police for prior threats. Police arrested three persons on suspicion of attempted murder. At year's end, the investigation was ongoing. The BIK condemned the attack and called on the government to treat the case as an attack on religious freedom and the BIK. The Mayor of Podujeva/o, Shpejtim Bulliqi, publicly condemned the act, and Assembly deputies visited BIK offices in Podujeva/o to show support. Separately, an imam in Pristina said that he reported to police threats received from a suspected former ISIS member.

The SOC said that in September an individual stopped a bus from Serbia with pilgrims, including children, in Peja/Pec. According to the SOC, the individual shouted at the pilgrims, placed a Kosovan flag on the bus's windshield, and took pictures of the bus. The SOC reported the case to police and requested a police escort, which was refused.

Bektashi representatives reported a case of a Bektashi believer who received a notice of reprimand from a private employer for taking a day off to observe a Bektashi holiday.

The UKT reported concerns about anti-Sufism from the Muslim community, which the UKT said was a means to seize historical Tarikat religious assets and establish control over that interpretation of Islam. UKT representatives reported instances of negative and distorted media portrayals, citing use of a photoshopped image of UKT representatives with a lesbian, gay, bisexual, transgender, queer, and intersex+ flag in the background and false reports concerning UKT's support for the legalization of same-sex marriage.

Jewish community representatives expressed concerns about antisemitic language in social media but did not cite specific examples.

National police said they received reports of 64 incidents targeting religious sites between January and September, compared with 87 incidents in all of 2021. The incidents targeted 42 Muslim properties, 21 SOC properties, and one Roman Catholic property. Police classified the majority of the incidents as theft or attempted theft and the remainder as threats, or destruction of or damage to public property, cemeteries or corpses.

In July, the OSCE Mission in Kosovo published a report, *The Protection of Cultural Heritage in Kosovo*, that examined incidents of theft, vandalism, disturbances, and desecration at religious and cultural heritage sites between 2014 and 2020. Of a total of 247 incidents over the seven-year period, 193 occurred in places of worship, while 45 targeted cemeteries. Of 112 total incidents of theft, 63 (56 percent) occurred in mosques and 42 (38 percent) in SOC places of worship. On the other hand, of the remaining 135 incidents, 77 (57 percent) occurred at SOC sites, 32 (24 percent) at Islamic properties, and 12 (9 percent) targeted Catholic sites. The report cited an increase in incidents over the period, primarily because of a rise in thefts since 2017 and increased public awareness of the need to report such incidents to police. According to the OSCE, financial gain appeared to be a significant motivating factor in criminal acts against religious sites.

The SOC stated that some of the incidents targeting its property in the country were religiously and ethnically motivated. Because religion and ethnicity are

often closely linked, it was sometimes difficult to categorize incidents as solely based on religious identity. In a press statement, the SOC said that many incidents “were results of anti-Serb rhetoric in political circles that incite violence and ethnic intolerance.”

The SOC reported that unknown person(s) threw rocks at the church’s parsonage in Vitomirice/Vitomirica in Peja/Pec municipality on January 6, Orthodox Christmas Eve. Separately, the SOC said unknown person(s) posted yellow tape and signs reading “Stop the works,” and “Works need to be stopped urgently” on the church’s building site, undergoing renovations, on January 13. The parsonage was robbed while under construction in 2021.

In February, the SOC said unknown persons broke into its church in Kamenice/Kamenica municipality and stole a sum of money. Separately, the SOC said vandals broke the glass on all windows and the entry door at its church in Ferizaj/Urosevac municipality in February. The SOC also expressed concern over “a series of break-ins of churches in Zubin Potok” in January.

On February 15, the OSCE expressed concerns on social media that religious sites continued to be targeted in incidents involving theft and damage to property.

In August, government officials and the dean of the faculty at the Faculty of Islamic Studies in Pristina stated that the faculty had not implemented an academic program designed to prepare students to lead mosques because the BIK had withheld its approval for the program. The Kosovo Accreditation Agency approved the establishment of the program in 2021.

Religious group leaders continued interfaith discussions on property rights, legislative priorities, and local community issues. In July, according to press reports, Bektashi leaders hosted an interfaith ceremony at their headquarters in Kosovo marking the establishment of the Bektashi Tekke of Gjakova/Djakovica. Among the religious leaders present were Roman Catholic Bishop Dodë Gjergji, KPEC President Femi Cakolli, and Chief Imam of Gjakova/Djakovica Visar Koshi.

Section IV. U.S. Government Policy and Engagement

The Ambassador and other embassy officials discussed and advocated with government officials, including President Osmani, Prime Minister Kurti, and Deputy Prime Minister Besnik Bislimi, Speaker of the Assembly Glauk Konjufca, and political party leaders enactment of amendments to the law on religious freedom that would allow religious groups to acquire legal status. They also urged government officials to respect religious freedom and pluralism and increase their communication with religious groups. The Ambassador and other embassy officials urged central and local government officials, including Prime Minister Kurti and Minister of Environment and Spatial Planning and Infrastructure Aliu, to respect the law on SPZs, particularly in the case of the road near Visoki Decani Monastery. The Ambassador, a visiting senior Department of State official, and embassy officials advocated with all levels of government implementation of the 2016 Constitutional Court decision ordering the registration of ownership of land to the Visoki Decani Monastery, urging the government and the judiciary to hold accountable officials responsible for failing to implement the ruling.

The Ambassador and other embassy officials urged increased dialogue between ethnic Albanian members of the government and SOC members. They conveyed this message in both private meetings and public statements, calling for cooperation between local governments and the SOC on issues such as property ownership, human rights, religious freedom, and overall security. Embassy officials helped resolve disputes between the SOC and the government regarding the residence status of clergy and tax issues. In May, the Ambassador joined the heads of the diplomatic missions of France, Germany, Italy, and the United Kingdom in statements supporting implementation of the Constitutional Court decision on the Visoki Decani land dispute and noted that, despite a lawful decision and subsequent petitions, the court decision had not yet been implemented. The embassy reiterated its call for the government to implement the court decision in October in a statement to media.

Embassy officials met with all major religious communities and several civil society organizations and discussed amendments to the law on religious freedom, social issues of common concern, religious freedom issues, and governmental relations with religious communities.

In March, the Ambassador hosted an interfaith discussion with religious leaders, including from the Tarikat, Bektashi, and Church of Jesus Christ communities, on religious pluralism, interfaith dialogue, protection of individual rights and freedom, and the still-pending amendments to the law on religious freedom.

The embassy frequently issued messages in the press and on social media in support of religious freedom. For example, the Ambassador highlighted on Twitter meetings he had in February, March, and August with SOC leaders in Gracanica and Visoki Decani monasteries and a visit he made in July to the Grand Mosque in Pristina, where he met with BIK leaders to mark the Islamic New Year. In all visits and corresponding social media posts, the Ambassador reaffirmed support for a multiethnic Kosovo that respects diverse religious and cultural heritage and ensures religious freedom. In October, the Ambassador met with SOC Patriarch Porfirije following his enthronement ceremony in Peja/Pec to congratulate the Patriarch and discuss the concerns of the SOC.

In September, an embassy-funded project on cultural and religious pluralism brought together more than 40 religious leaders, civil society representatives, and youth from across the country to promote interfaith dialogue and peaceful coexistence.

In December, the Ambassador provided remarks at the government's open discussion on amendments to the law on religious freedom, calling on the government and religious leaders to ensure equal protection and free expression of religion for all.